

THE VIRTUE OF PAIN.

BY A. P. H.

BUT for the restraining influence of timely pain, bodily and mental, the vast majority of mankind would be irredeemable criminals.

Pain is nature's moral deterrent, and in its adaptation to the exact requirements of individual character and environment, the wise omniscience of a merciful Providence is apparent. The sharp rebuke necessary to pull up the robust, energetic youth, manifested in some dire, painful accident, would be wanton cruelty in the man of culture or years, and his more refined moral medicine of neuralgia, or dyspepsia, would not serve to stem the vicious torrent of the hardened ruffian; the prostrating bed of lingering sickness must be his cure. And the adequacy of the punishments is largely derived from the compatibility of the environment and vocation of each being.

The power of pain does not extend to the creation of saints, but it is indispensable to the consolidation of inherent character.

In a world of moral perfection, healthy buoyancy would be more an essential complement to, than a natural result of, that perfection; and in the harmonious cohesion of these two powers, would exist an invulnerable safeguard against any corrupt suggestion, or impulse. The moral laws complied with can exact from nature no penalties, and not till nature's appeal has been set aside, does Providence intervene; but a slip, a falling away from the ideal, and the sinking weight of evil at once forces upward a compensating, moral balance. For between pain resultant on a disregard of the natural or hygienic laws, and what might be termed providential pain, a subtle difference exists, apart from the source of each; a difference of intention, of application, of degree; the one, the consequence of an act and the other, prevention of it. The extent and power of the former is fixed and unalterable, and must work until the physical

balance is restored; but the latter is of divine purpose, and acts in varying degree, to secure with the minimum of force the necessary result, and then, as circumstances require, to at once disappear, or be indefinitely prolonged. Scientists may say that all pain is the retributive exaction of outraged nature; but no being is primarily responsible for all the pain he suffers. He is powerless to prevent the inherited pain; the sudden, accidental pain; the pain derived from some unseen, gripping infection; and, disclosing most the hand of Providence, the mental pain of acute affliction. The headache and general lethargy, which, on waking, warn the dissipated individual of the result of his previous night's infringement of the laws of moderation, and the inherited, constitutional headache or neuralgia of the physically anaemic, but morally obedient (because so constrained) act to the same end; both demonstrate clearly the need for quiet restraint and care. Thus does nature go hand in hand with Providence in its education of character.

Moral perfection in mankind is nearest approached by the being, who, physically infirm beyond cure at birth, struggles through a pain-wracked life to an early death. "Whom the gods love die young." Perhaps the underlying reason why persons who suffer much from bad health and constant pain, have no great dread of death, lies in the fact that in the clearness of their consciences they feel unconsciously morally prepared by pain for anything the Unknown may offer. Those with the greatest dread of death are those of most vigorous health. The greatest criminals have almost all been men of robust, even brutal health.

Though the mental tendency of humanity may be towards morality, it is a tendency wholly unsubstantial, imaginative, and without definite known compensation. And in the absence in these days of any great, purifying mind incentives, it must virtually exist on itself; and the absorbing, necessitous struggle for bodily existence in an intensely practical world, robs this soul-flame of its vital heat—and then one power only, can, with tempered breeze, keep alive the fire. For the animal propensity is at least stronger in its reality, its appeal to physical desire, with the known fact of tangible result and satisfaction. In animals from intuitive necessity, and in humanity, less from that reason than from imaginative desire born of idleness, it is a mighty cumulative force needing an exactly neutralizing, disciplinary force. For animals the prompt and severe code of nature suffices for its own ends, with the supreme final check of destruction. Self-preservation in them induces obedience. But for the reasoning, thinking man, a merciful Providence threatens

no dread annihilation for the non-observance of His laws, but appeals with lesser, fitting punishment, harmoniously applied. And in the mere sufficiency of this preventive punishment, we have abundant evidence of the perfectly balanced justice of Providence. Our physical pains and mental sorrows are precisely attuned to the needs of our moral character. Such as the latter is, it could not be stable, it could not progress (and in that event it must, of course, retrogress) without this exquisitely dovetailing, protective guidance.

Since the special food of the material inclination, then, is imaginative desire born of idleness, we have thus the paramount necessity for the first great moral armor of man, namely, work. But though continuous hard work or thinking is a natural safeguard of good, it is not always enough. The requirements of strenuous wage-earning leave little energy for vicious degeneracy; but a time of reaction creeps in, when, from prolonged undermining effort, the structure of character quivers, and seeks to right itself in other grooves. Then pain (but the mere minimum) alone can cement the foundation, and add stability. Man can work in moderate pain because he must, his physical nature is adapted to it; but his energy, sapped by that force, leaves him proof against the demands of passion, even where inclination exists. And when sharp sorrow has numbed the imagination, the starvation of the animal instinct following, must tend to solidify the moral.

Bodily pain adapted in degree to the individual is a deterrent of universal efficacy, and because of its special influence over man's stronger element, is superior to the restraint imposed by mental grief. The former appeals with equal physical force to all; the limited power of the latter—within the confines, to go beyond which may produce insanity—does not admit of adaptation to temperament, and therefore can never affect equally the individual of stolid, unemotional character, with the introspective, sensitive individual of active imagination. Thus the latter would be steadied and chastened by a great loss, which would perhaps have the opposite effect of plunging the former into headlong, vicious indulgence, only ended by the natural results of such conduct. Bodily pain stuns at once, and the peevishness or ill-temper which it engenders are mere bubbles on the surface of the ocean in whose bosom flows unmoved the steady current of character. Bound to his bed by the chains of wasting strength, acute sickness, or any physical defection, the most confirmed criminal must perforce awhile, must for the nonce be immune from vice, and give his disorganized, moral faculties time to recuperate, and weld the better elements of such char-

acter as he possesses. So that, as is probable, should the man again pursue a corrupt existence, the effects of chastening pain must prevent his overstepping the mark, must limit in extent his vicious propensity to the normal resisting strength of his character. It is only a matter of degree and external surroundings as to how far our immoral appetites can lead us, before being met and upset by the arresting limit. Every being, when in a lowered moral condition he has been slowly drifting down stream into the whirlpool of passion, must have many times been met and guided by the friendly current of pain in safety to the calm waters of submissive quietude.

How many of the worst criminals after a severe accident, necessitated, of course, by equally severe vice, have risen from their sick-beds morally new men. In their cases the checking power has been exerted at a crisis, and its strength, urged by necessity, has effected a revolution.

The timely grip of the lesser aches, mental worries, and disappointments, has a divine, corrective significance, that in our weakness and want of observation we neither see nor appreciate. But if with trusting insight we could only gratefully perceive the great truth of the divine virtue, and, in our frailty, the necessity of pain to our moral well-being, it should be our earnest endeavor to bear it with subdued fortitude, and instead of wasting our energies in useless repining and complaint, seek for the great need, which gave it timely birth, and suffered dissolution at its inception.

So, with the philosophic education of enlightened and discerning introspection, might we in time come to pray for pain.